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Tanya L. Tromble
Aix Marseille Université, LERMA EA 853

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Fiction in Fact and Fact in Fiction in the Writing of Joyce Carol Oates

Tanya L. Tromble
Aix Marseille Université

Joyce Carol Oates draws extensively on news stories, as well as on elements of her own family's past, to find inspiration for her works of fiction. She has explored the Chappaquiddick incident involving Ted Kennedy (*Black Water*, 1992) and the JonBenet Ramsay murder case (*My Sister, My Love*, 2008). Her story "The Mutants" fictionalizes an aspect of the 9/11 events in Manhattan in an attempt to "capture the hallucinatory nature of the long events of that siege" (Wyatt). She has woven the Niagara Falls Love Canal environmental scandal into the framework of *The Falls* (2004) and taken inspiration from sordid events in her own family's past for the beginning of *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007). Occasionally, her use of news items can lead to scandal as when a victim's family strongly objected to the reappropriation of his story in Oates's "Landfill" (*Dear Husband,: Stories*, 2009). However, in none of these examples does Oates purport to relate the precise real-life "facts" of the historical events. Indeed, for an author who believes in the multiplicity of truths such a task would be superfluous, if it was in fact possible, given what she perceives to be the inherently "error-prone" nature of our species. In her essay "On Fiction in Fact," she writes that "Language by its very nature tends to distort experience. With the best of intentions, in recalling the past, if even a dream of the previous night, we are already altering—one might say violating—the original experience, which may have been wordless and was certainly improvised" (Oates, "On Ficiton" 77). In response to what she sees as the problematic nature of language, memory and the artificial nature of writing, Oates has cultivated a self-described "psychological realism" that seeks to depict a greater realm of truth beyond the world of facts, that is to say the truth of emotion and felt experience, "states of mind [which are] real enough—emotions, moods, shifting obsessions, beliefs—though immeasurable" (Oates, "Afterword" 307).

As a writer who is often considered to be a chronicler of the American middle class, there can be no doubt that Oates's fiction draws upon not only a

variety of true crime news stories but also generally describes realistic situations and emotions that speak to contemporary readers. In question and answer sessions with the public, for example, admiring readers often want to know how it is that she can create such a variety of believable, realistic characters of all ages, sexes, and walks of life. During a 1994 interview with Gavin Cologne-Brookes, Oates responds to a question about whether her work is "often a conscious, if indirect, reaction to current political and social situations" by saying that she is "an American writer keenly attuned to the world in which [she] live[s], its seismic shudders and more subtle emanations" (Cologne-Brookes 550). Cologne-Brookes sees an example of this in an elliptical reference to AIDS in Oates's novel *American Appetites* (1989) when Glynnis McCullough reproaches her husband, whom she suspects of adultery, for "bringing disease into our lives, bringing death" (Oates, *American* 91). Adultery is not death, but "death" could be a reference to AIDS, a preoccupation of the 1980s to which the sexually promiscuous, it was believed, particularly ran the risk of exposure.[1]

Philosophical Imagination

"I have a very philosophical imagination," Oates claims in a 1997 interview. She continues: "I studied philosophy in college so basic philosophical questions are always scrolling through my mind like, 'Why am I doing this? What is the value of this? What is the purpose of this?' These questions are very hard to answer."[2] In addition to being a fiction writer "in-tune" with her times, two relatively recent works of non-fiction both highlight Oates's self-called "philosophical imagination" and allow her readers to see just how much of her personal world view is written into her fiction, as well as the ways in which her non-fiction writing is influenced by her more than fifty-year career as a fiction writer: *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates: 1973-1982* (2007)[3] and *A Widow's Story: A Memoir* (2011).[4]

Oates maintains that writing in a journal is the most personal form of writing, a form in which the author cannot help but reveal aspects of his "true" self. Various comments throughout the work indicate that the mystery of what constitutes the individual and how one perceives and understands the world outside oneself are never far from her mind.[5] The very first entry on January 1,

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[1] Gavin Cologne-Brookes, Email to the author (9 May 2011).
[2] "Interview: Joyce Carol Oates," *Academy of Achievement* (20 May 1997).
[3] Abbreviated as *JJCO* for in-text citations.
[4] Abbreviated as *WS* for in-text citations.
[5] Nearly twenty years later Oates is still dwelling on this same idea, as demonstrated by the following passage in her "Afterword: Reflections on the Grotesque": "I take as the most profound mystery of our human experience the fact that, though we each exist subjectively, and know the world only through the prism of self, this 'subjectivity' is inaccessible, thus unreal, and mysterious,

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1973 gets right to the point: "Query: Does the individual exist?" (*JJCO* 2). In the final paragraph of her preface, she explains:

> The act of writing in a journal is the very antithesis of writing for others. The skeptic might object that the writer of a journal may be deliberately creating a journal-self, like a fictitious character, and while this might be true, for some, for a limited period of time, such a position can't be sustained for very long, and certainly not for years. It might be argued that, like our fingerprints and voice 'prints,' our journal-selves are distinctly our own; try as we might, we can't elude them; the person one *is*, is evident in every line; not a syllable can be falsified. (*JJCO* xiv)

Reading her journal, then, seems to be the closest we, as outsiders, can hope to come, in Oates's opinion, to an understanding of her essential self.

In her frequent musings about the nature of individuality, it becomes clear that Oates believes not in the existence of one, complete, coherent self, but rather in the juxtaposition, within each individual, of multiple selves. Nowhere is this more evident than when she evokes her feelings about her personal and public selves. She expresses dissatisfaction at having to leave behind her private self, Joyce Smith, in order to publicly incarnate "Joyce Carol Oates," a sort of personality straightjacket which she describes at one point as a "restriction to a few cubic feet of consciousness" (*JJCO* 80). This sentiment that there exists a sort of inherent human multiple personality disorder is also alluded to in her memoir when she writes "I am never sure if I am actually 'feeling' much of anything or rather just simulating what a normal person might feel in these circumstances; as I have become adept at impersonating *Joyce Carol Oates*" (*WS* 326-327). Oates is fond of referencing William James, who she calls "our greatest American philosopher," notably his idea, which she paraphrases, that "we have as many public selves as there are people whom we know. But we have a single, singular, intractable, and perhaps undisguisable 'inner self' most at home in secret places" (*JJCO* xiv). To the veteran Oates reader, then, it comes as no surprise that this issue of knowing the other is once again raised in her memoir. She evokes, for example, the pain of realizing "that she might not have known [her husband], in the deepest and most profound way" (*WS* 369).

In Oates's mature fiction, one of the ways in which this idea is communicated is through a narrative technique that employs multiple limited viewpoints in order to emphasize how little the characters truly know about each other. An example of this can be found in the novel *The Tattooed Girl* (2003) in

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to others. And the obverse—all *others* are, in the deepest sense, *strangers*" (Oates, "Afterword" 303).

which the structure foregrounds the multiple selves of the main characters. The sections of this novel are narrated from the viewpoints of four different focalizers: Joshua, Dmitri, Jet, and Alma, the eponymous tattooed girl. Alma is the central protagonist, but who is she and what does she represent? The reader first "sees" her through the eyes of the two male characters who interpret her in very different ways. To Dmitri, the pimp, she appears as the perfect prey, a traumatized thirtyish woman who will easily bend to his will. To Joshua, the writer, she is a girl who might benefit from his protection and tutelage. When the narrative voice shifts to that of Alma's inside view, roughly a hundred pages into the novel, it becomes clear that neither man truly understands her, and vice versa. In *The Tattooed Girl*, then, the technique of multiplying inside views makes it clear that no one character's viewpoint is completely trustworthy and creates tension in the reader who, privy to the overall view, is aware of problems that the characters themselves remain oblivious to.

A discussion of the ideas expressed in Oates's journal and their relationship to her writing could be the subject of a paper in itself. Suffice it to say that the work is infused with a constant questioning about the nature of self, other and mystery, and these same themes are to be found at the obsessive center of her fictional worlds which represent a literary project dedicated to exploring the inherent mystery of life. In fact, in several respects—among them, the way it skips frequently from one subject or anecdote to another and the space devoted to questioning and wondering—the *Journal* reads like certain passages of Oates's fiction with herself as primary protagonist, a phenomenon that is repeated in her later memoir.

Fiction or Non-Fiction?

Oates's husband of 47 years, Raymond Smith, unexpectedly passed away due to complications following pneumonia in February 2008. Her memoir, *A Widow's Story*, is a published testimony to her experience of widowhood in which she recounts the depression and guilt she encountered in the first months of what she calls her "posthumous" life. However, if one were not privy to the biographical fact about the death of Raymond Smith and the subtitle "A Memoir" were omitted, there would be very little to distinguish this volume as a work of non-fiction. First-person narration, which Oates uses in her memoir, may be rare as the dominant voice of a lengthy Oates novel, but it is certainly not unheard of in her oeuvre.[6] In fact, it is difficult to resist reading this memoir as another brilliant novel penned by an author seismically in-tune with yet another contemporary issue for the reason that it structurally, thematically and

[6] Two examples of fictional works narrated in the first-person by characters telling their own life stories in journal or memoir-type form include the early novel *Expensive People* (1968) and the more recent *My Sister, My Love* (2008).

typographically shares many characterstics with much of her recent fiction. Structurally, it is a forward-moving work—encompassing the timeframe from February to August 2008—scattered with flashbacks relating memories of Oates's life with Ray, as in Chapter 69, "'Happy, and Excited,'" which is entirely devoted to reminiscences about their first year of married life together in Beaumont, Texas. Indeed, frequent recourse to analepsis is a prominent characteristic of Oates's contemporary fiction which oftentimes more ressembles an intermingled collage of life-scenes than a fluid stream of story with definite starting and ending points. Thematically, as well, the memoir has much in common with a typical Oates fictional plot. To begin, throughout the narrative, she often chooses to refer to herself in the third person as "the widow": "*What the widow must remember: her husband's death did not happen to her but to her husband. I have no right to appropriate Ray's death*" (*WS* 228). This recourse to character-types is a technique Oates frequently employs to emphasize the universality of her characters' experiences and reactions. Furthermore, as the characters in her novels must, in order to move forward, accept the fact that they will never know the "whole truth" about their traumatic pasts, Oates's personal story in her memoir involves a similar pattern of trauma, grief, guilt, self-interrogation and, finally, acceptance. Indeed, Oates mentions, in her memoir, a feeling that she had first lived her life through her fiction:

> I am made to think, not for the first time, that in my writing I have plunged ahead—head-on, heedlessly one might say—or "fearlessly"—into my own future: this time of utter raw anguished loss. Though I may have had, since adolescence, a kind of intellectual/literary precocity, I had not *experienced* much; nor would I *experience* much until I was well into middle-age—the illnesses and deaths of my parents, this unexpected death of my husband. (*WS* 141)

In her novels, a hidden secret constitutes a sort of black hole detrimental to the subject's ability to function. Examples include the stasis affecting characters in *The Falls* and *Little Bird of Heaven* (2009) who have become paralyzed by their lack of knowledge regarding their fathers' pasts. In the memoir, too, there is a hidden secret to which there can never be a definitive response: the "truth" behind the issue of whether or not the widow reacted appropriately to her husband's illness. The ability or inability to accept the inaccessibility of this "truth" is a theme that runs throughout the narrative and will ultimately determine whether or not the widow succumbs to madness. Furthermore, frequent comments throughout the memoir bely the gothic sensibility that pervades Oates's fiction: "Where the life-struggle is stark, primitive, elemental—the terror is of being devoured alive. /

Where the life-struggle is more 'civilized'—the terror is of being driven mad" (*WS* 268). In terms of the material layout, as well, the pages of Oates's memoir are indistinguishable from the pages of many recent novels. Glancing at a page, one notices the narrative is frequently interrupted by dashes, ellipses, and italicized passages. Leafing through the pages of the memoir side by side with *The Falls*, for example, reveals that in both works rarely do more than two or three pages go by without the flow of the text being broken by an italicized passage which is often meant to represent an interruption surging up into the text from another dimension. At one point in the memoir, Oates imagines herself in conversation with her late husband, whose words are represented in italics. This fictitious "Ray" admonishes her—"*Honey you're just excited. Don't take these people too seriously*"—and counsels her—"*Of course not. You're exaggerating. Don't upset yourself needlessly*" (*WS* 320, 321). This technique of typographically rendering certain passages in italics to set them apart, indicating their difference from the narrative in which they are embedded, allows the reader access to two levels of meaning in relation to the characters: both the exterior and interior realms. The effect created by this technique is of a disjointed narrative struggling to render a multi-layered reality. Italicized interruptions indicate rupture while at the same time pointing to continuity, betraying the instability of the present while offering a glimpse of the complex space/time relationships that make up lived experience. The differences in font indicate to the reader the passage between types of information with different psychological ramifications, the coexistence of objective and subjective realms.

Roughly half of the sixteen stories in the 2010 collection *Sourland*[7] were first published in the two-year period following the death of Oates's husband. Three of these stories disturbingly depict widows who are subjected to shocking ordeals of physical violation: "Pumpkin-Head" (*The New Yorker*, January 2009), "Probate" (*Salmagundi*, Fall 2010), and "Sourland" (*Boulevard*, Fall 2009). The three widow protagonists seem to be closely modeled after the Oates that is depicted in the memoir, not only in their patterns of grief, but also in the structure of their relationships with their husbands. All three were married to their professional, scholarly husbands for significant lengths of time, from 20 (Hadley in "Pumpkin-Head") to 32 years (Adrienne in "Probate"), and the couples remained childless. All three men died unexpected, premature deaths and were cremated, leaving their "surviving spouses" behind to execute "death-duties." These female characters view their lives in terms of the "previous, protected life" of before (*SL* 3) and the "diminished" new life of after (*SL* 211), the two of which are separated by a gaping "abyss" (*SL* 212). They must take pills in order to sleep and suffer deeply from survivor's guilt. Of Hadley, in "Pumpkin-Head," we read:

[7] Abbreviated as *SL* for in-text citations.

"She was a widow who had caused her husband to be burnt to ashes and was unrepentant, unpunished" (*SL* 9). Of Adrienne, in "Probate": "The widow is one who comes swiftly to the knowledge *Whatever harm comes to you, you deserve. For you are still alive*" (*SL* 222). As Oates, in her memoir, describes herself as practically welcoming her shingles outbreak as a sort of physical punishment she can respond to, the widow protagonists in these three stories almost seem to invite and welcome physical assault as just punishment to assuage their guilt.

Interestingly, in other stories from the collection first published several years before Raymond Smith's unexpected passing, Oates had already written passages that greatly parallel emotions and situations testified to in her memoir. In the story "Bitch" (*Boulevard*, 2005), for example, hospitals are described as dangerous places to be avoided because "the air of hospitals is a petri dish of teeming microorganisms" (*SL* 67). Furthermore, when the protagonist's father passes, like Oates and her husband, she is not with him, but must be "wakened from a stuporous sleep by a ringing phone" (*SL* 70). Later, she is confronted with the "task" of clearing the hospital room and reacts similarly to the way Oates presents herself reacting in her memoir: "She was capable of this task, she thought" (*SL* 70).[8] If fiction is the art form that most helps us work through and give meaning to life, might we not also occasionally experience events under the influence of moments we have previously encountered through fictional experience? The examples from Oates's writing illustrate the complexity of the relationship between life and writing as she acknowledges in her essay "On Fiction In Fact":

> At least in theory, a diary or a journal may be a fairly accurate record of an individual's life, but any memoir or autobiography that is artfully shaped, didactically intended, divided into sections, and narrated with a retrospective omniscience is a text, and therefore an artifact. It may contain elements of truth, but its very organization belies the messiness and myopia of real life. (Oates, "On Fiction" 78)

Psychological Realism as a Repository of Truths

As the discussion of Oates's fiction and non-fiction works has thus far made clear, as "text" the memoir emanates from the same world vision discernable in Oates's fiction, the essence of which is that the inherently

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[8] Other examples include "The Barter" (*Story*, 1999) in which a boy accepts a beating thinking he is giving something up in exchange for bringing his father home from the hospital, and "Death Certificate" (*Boulevard*, Fall 2006) which is constructed around the disagreeable ordeal of picking up a copy of a death certificate at a county courthouse.

enigmatic nature of life must be accepted if one is to continue living and embracing life. In *A Widow's Story*, Oates reflects on the essence of memoir:

> As the memoir is the most seductive of literary genres, so the memoir is the most dangerous of genres. For the memoir is a repository of truths, as each discrete truth is uttered, but the memoir can't be the repository of Truth which is the very breadth of the sky, too vast to be perceived in a single gaze. (*WS* 300)

Similary, it becomes clear through her writing that Oates considers fiction, though it does not represent an accumulation of "facts," as a repository of psychological truths. Reflecting on her teaching experience at Princeton University, she writes:

> Our creative writing courses here in the arts building at 185 Nassau provide counter-worlds in which the most upsetting truths can be uttered. Perversely, what is "fiction" is likely to be what is "most real"—in writing of fictitious individuals, the young writer is most likely writing about him-/herself. (*WS* 342-343)

Furthermore, Oates reminds us that to the novelist, his/her characters "are invariably as 'real' as individuals in the 'real' world" (*WS* 381).

The juxtaposition of highly realistic passages with others that much more resemble flights of fancy is an important characteristic of Oates's fiction. In both her fiction and personal non-fiction,[9] Oates's realism must be understood in terms of unconscious, emotional response rather than as the expression of cold, hard fact, as a repository of metaphorical, rather than literal truth, of the subjective as opposed to the objective.[10] For this author, then, the juxtaposition of both realistic and imaginary planes is not at all incompatible, and their blending is one of the major components of a mode of writing which she refers to as "psychological realism." In her introduction to *Best New American Voices 2003*, Oates discusses what is meant by the term "psychological realism":

> By "psychological realism" we mean, usually, the establishment of a central consciousness through whose perspective a story is

[9] I use the expression "personal non-fiction" to indicate the journal and the memoir as opposed to other non-fiction writing such as essays and book reviews.

[10] "Especially today, in an electronic era in which staggering quantities of facts are available, many of us feel, as readers, that we can trust the truth of only a fraction of what we read, even when it's presented as 'true' by seemingly reputable writers and publishers. / (Except when we read fiction or poetry, whose truth is understood to be metaphorical, and not literal; subjective, and not objective.)" (Oates, "On Fiction" 76).

> narrated or unfolds; our involvement in the story depends largely upon the plausibility and worth of this central consciousness. Do we believe in him or her? Is the fictional world convincing? Unlike fantasy, realism derives much of its power from a skillful evocation of time and place. (Oates, Introduction x)

Three years later, she explains in an interview with Carole Burns: "The tradition in which I see myself is that of psychological realism, which attempts to mirror the complex outside world of society, politics, art, domestic life, as well as to interpret it." This conception of her fictional project has remained steady throughout her career as she referred to herself as a "psychological realist" as early as 1974, explaining that this involves taking "the area of the human psyche, or mind, as the centre of all experience of reality."[11] Thus, for Oates, psychological realism involves recounting a story from the rational view of a coherent (realistic, because believable) personality. To this end, developing the unconscious depths of the characters is as important as positing them in an authentic and believable exterior world.

Many examples from Oates's novel *The Falls* point to a juxtaposition of distances between the real and the apparent, simultaneously exploring and enhancing the mysterious relationship between conscious and unconscious states, between public and private personas. This results in much importance being given to dreams, premonitions and visions which are experienced as real by the characters in a way that reality (the exterior world) is not. Ariah's dream/vision of Dirk on the tightrope is an appropriate example. She sees him as a funambulist in ministerial dress perched high over the windy Niagara Gorge and experiences a feeling of raw terror:

> One night when she'd been Mrs. Dirk Burnaby for just fifteen days, she saw through the lattice window beyond their bed a sickle moon glowing through columns of mist like a winking eye. She was cradling her deeply sleeping husband in her arms. She meant to protect him forever! Yet her eyelids began to flutter. Her eyes were shutting. She opened them wide to see her husband crossing the immense Niagara Gorge on—what was it? A tightrope? A *tightrope*? His back was to her. His fair flaxen hair blew in the wind. He wore a black costume, ministerial. He was carrying a twelve-foot bamboo pole to balance himself. It was a performance appropriate to a circus but, here, deadly. And there was the wind.

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[11] "Face to Face," *Maclean's* (April 1974): 60. Cited by Waller 41. In a recently reprinted review about Flannery O'Connor's fiction, "'Large and Startling Figures': The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," Oates writes that "the most elevated psychological realism [...] takes as its natural subject the *humanness* of its characters." (Oates, *In Rough Country* 109-110)

> Why was he doing such a thing, why when they loved each other so much?
>
> At shore, Ariah leaned over an iron railing that dug into her waist and cried out to him in a raw, terrified voice. *Come back! I love you! You can't leave me!* (Oates, *Falls* 120)

Ariah's vision mixes the image of Dirk's tightrope-walking ancestor with the loss of her first minister husband and her fear of the precariousness of her newfound happiness. However, though this episode is clearly a dream—her husband is sleeping soundly in her arms at the time—it takes on more psychic truth for Ariah than the fact of her husband's real life devotion and she becomes convinced that she is doomed to lose him. In fictional terms it is easy to dismiss this episode as simple foreshadowing, a hint to the reader of tragedy to come, and it certainly does serve this function. However, if Ariah is viewed as a plausible consciousness, we must consider that this episode, which she purportedly "lived" as if it were real, might have affected her future relationship with her husband. How "real" should the vision be considered? How should it be interpreted? Is it a simple coincidence that her irrational fear coincidentally came true? Or is her vision a form of psychic foresight? Did she doom her marriage to failure because she did not truly believe in it? Such borderline experiences at the frontier between the real and the unreal are of prime importance in *The Falls* and contribute greatly to the open, fluctuating quality of the work.

Similarly, in the memoir, Oates repeatedly describes herself as being haunted by a recurring vision of a creature that she finds observing her from a short distance and describes as an "ugly lizard-thing" or a "basilisk." The basilisk, a mythological creature whose look can kill, is an appropriate symbol for the negative thoughts of guilt and suicide that Oates struggles with during the months following her husband's death. As such, she imagines it jeering at her and taunting her, as in one excursion to the grocery store:

> Pushing the grocery cart out into the parking lot I am observed from a little distance by the ugly lizard-thing jeering at me as clumsily I unload the cart, place the grocery bags in the trunk of the car *Do you think that you can continue like this? Are you so desperate to live, you want to continue like this?* (*WS* 353)

The reader might wonder whether Oates, in her depressed, slightly medicated state, really saw this grotesque creature or whether, during the memoir-writing process, she simply invented it as a trope to illustrate the desperation of her mental condition at the time. However, one might question the very pertinence of such an inquiry. What matters is not the degree of "reality" of the basilisk, but the

fact that its existence in the text effectively contributes to communicating the nature of Oates's disturbed mental state during the initial stages of her grieving process.

Gray Area: A Conclusion

Oates does not simply bring her life to work; her work and her life are inextricably bound. This may be a cliché, but it is definitely one that applies here, especially as, in accounting for her "posthumous" existence, she seems to "need" both fictional and non-fictional outlets. Yet, at the same time, her work clearly shows that the line between them is a gray area in which the distinctions between fiction, reality and experience are blurred. If Oates's memoir is a repository of truths, and the elements that are the building blocks of her memoir (and non-fiction in general) are also those used to construct her fiction, then her fiction must also be a repository of truths. In her memoir, Oates quotes Hemingway on this subject:

> From things that have happened and from all things that you know and all those you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality. That is why you write and for no other reason. (*WS* 221)

In guise of a conclusion, let me share a final example of the blurring of fact and fiction in Oates's work that also happens to be another Oates/Hemingway link. The story "Papa At Ketchum, 1961" from the collection *Wild Nights!: Stories about the last days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway*[12] tells of an unusual encounter between the older male writer and a deer. The episode begins on a morning when the "Papa" character is trying to work but ideas are not coming to him: "From the window of his second-floor workroom facing the Sawtooth Mountains he was watching a young stag at the edge of the woods, that was behaving strangely." He decides to go out to the creature: "When he was about fifteen feet from the struggling stag he saw that it had caught the miniature antlers in a wicked strip of barbed wire" (*WN* 195-196). Following a physical struggle with the creature, he is finally able to free the stag from the wire and it runs off into the woods: "Except for the hoof-trampled snow, and the blood on the snow, and the old man on his ass in the snow wiping deer-blood and deer-spittle on his trousers, you would not have guessed that there had been any deer at all. / Mornings when work does not come" (*WN* 199). In the later memoir, Oates

[12] Abbreviated as *WN* for in-text citations.

writes of a similar deer sighting by her and Ray: "I feel trapped. I am trapped. On the far side of our pond once we'd seen a young deer, a buck, shaking his head violently—his slender horns were tangled in what looked like wire. This is how I feel—my head is tangled in wire" (*WS* 200). Thus, it seems fair to consider that Oates has integrated one of her own real-life experiences into her fictional imagination of the last days of Ernest Hemingway, allowing her character to help the animal in a way she and her husband could not envisage and pointing toward the catharctic power of fiction for the writer herself.

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